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CNN SATURDAY

Interview With Scott Atran

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RENAY SAN MIGUEL, CNN ANCHOR: Swaying public opinion is one thing, but motivating someone to kill themselves for a cause is another. Or is it? What type of person would strap a bomb to their body and blow themselves up?

New evidence suggests suicide bombers are not crazed, uneducated cowards but ordinary people, a lot like you and me, if you can believe that. These findings were released this week in the journal "Science." The author of the paper joins us for our Washington bureau. Anthropologist Scott Atran with the University of Michigan and the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris, joins us now. Mr. Atran, thanks for being with us today.

SCOTT ATRAN, ANTHROPOLOGIST, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN: Thanks, Renay.

SAN MIGUEL: Before we get into your findings, how did you come by them? How did you get hold of this research and evidence?

ATRAN: Well, I lived for many years in the Middle East, working at the Hebrew University and (UNINTELLIGIBLE) and also with the French government. And I got to find out how these groups were starting to infiltrate into their communities. And then I paid attention, especially after 9/11, simply to help do anything I could to stop the killing. And so I began to do sort of a metaanalysis of all the studies done up to this time.

SAN MIGUEL: So the stereotype has been so far of a poor, uneducated, somebody who is easily manipulated kind of extremist as fitting the profile of a suicide bomber. That's not what you found, is it?

ATRAN: No. In fact, they're as educated and economically well- off and psychologically stable as their surrounding populations, if not more so.

SAN MIGUEL: So what does this do to the arguments that, you know, if all the West needs to do is build up the economies in these countries that breed suicide bombers?

ATRAN: Well, the strategy to undermine terrorism by educating or elevating the economic conditions of the populations from which these bombers spring from, as President Bush proposed in Monterey last year, is not a very promising strategy.

SAN MIGUEL: What's the process of recruitment? How do you go about spotting these people? How would people who want to use suicide bombers, these extremist groups, where do they spot them, where do they find them, how do they do it?

ATRAN: Well, they send talent scouts out to spy out schools and mosques and community gathering places. And they see who stays after class longest, who listens intently. And they begin to talk to potential candidates and find out who's fairly well balanced and poised. They talk to the neighborhood and they weed out those who have broken families or history of violence and emotional instability. And also those who would do it primarily for the 72 virgins and the money that Saddam Hussein and others would promise.

I mean, the media's fixation on the virgins and the money is more our society's problem than theirs. And then, for about the next 18 months you get charismatic leaders who slowly begin to isolate these people from their families and friends and forge close-knit family- like groupings whose family members commit for one another much like a mother would willingly sacrifice her life for a child.



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SAN MIGUEL: Manipulation techniques that you say are used here, you claim are similar to those used in certain American industries, like the fast food industry or pornography. What do you mean by that?

ATRAN: Yes, as I try to explain in the article in "Science" and in my book, "In Gods We Trust," it's the recruiting organizations that make people into human bombs. And they do this by manipulating heartfelt universal desires. The same desires that I think are biologically evolved, such as the desires that give rise to religious sentiments. And in much the same way, the fast food and the pornography industry manipulate biologically evolved desires for ends that benefit not the individual, but the recruiting organization.

And just like our best Madison Avenue advertisers, these charismatic leaders know how to turn sincere desires into cravings for whatever they're pitching.

SAN MIGUEL: So how do you fight this? I mean, if the idea is it's not just as as -- not just going into some country and building up the economy and taking away the poverty and the lack of education, how do you stop suicide bombing?

ATRAN: That's the crucial question. And I think we've got to do a lot more to prevent these virulent institutions from attaching themselves to the communities. And the only way to do that, I think, is by addressing the grievances, especially in places like Palestine, where daily images of media violence have made it the global focus of our Muslim attention.

Now that doesn't mean you can negotiate over all goals and grievances. Obviously you can't negotiate with al Qaeda, who is interested in destroying the nations state system and replacing it with the global Caliphate. But the millions who sympathize with it have to be engaged. The alternative is devastation, and I don't think the war in Iraq's going to help.

SAN MIGUEL: I was just going to ask you. You've heard no doubt the critics -- this is our last question here, because we're running out of time -- the critics of the U.S. war plan say that, you know, if America goes in there and does the invasion, you're going to create thousands of bin Ladens or, I guess, for the sake of this argument, thousands of suicide bombers. And you're saying that that will indeed happen?

ATRAN: Well, there's a recent U.N. report that shows that recruitment for this kind of action is increasing in 40 countries around the world. So, yes, I'd be worried.

SAN MIGUEL: We've been speaking with anthropologist and psychologist Scott Atran from the University of Michigan, the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris. Thank you very much for your time. We appreciate your insight.

ATRAN: Thanks, Renay.

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